



## INTERNATIONAL WEBINARS AND LIVE EVENTS

### IS SPACE CLOSING FOR CIVIL SOCIETY IN GLOBAL HEALTH?

By the Global Health Centre (Graduate Institute) – 19 May 2020

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**Pushbacks** towards non-profit organizations working on health are on the rise. Once you start asking questions that are a bit delicate, you start shifting from **comfortable space to dangerous situation**.

It is rare to see International NGOs (**INGOs**) coming up with statements on the **effects of lockdowns on people** at grass root level and the **political implications**. It is most often **small organizations** that are very little to lose when they speak up.

At the **country level**, it is important to look at the **role of consultancy firms**. **Weakening of health services** happened because of the **massive privatisations** that took place before. There is a big issue in health regarding the **role and power** of consultancy firms.

COVID19 shed light on many issues. The pandemic taught us that **it is fundamental that governments are held accountable**.

*Mercy Korir - Medical Doctor; Journalist, KTN News, Kenya:*

When you start reporting about **delicate topics**, it becomes **political**. For example, when people raise issues about **government's spending** during the crisis, it becomes political. When you talk about money and allocations, it becomes political and **tension is put on journalists**.

COVID19 is giving us a chance to bring up issues that were not possible to bring up before. **Health is now top of the agenda**. Journalists are doing much better in **Kenya** than in other **African states**.

COVID19 presented a situation where **health is at the forefront**. **Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Media have to work hand in hand** to offer solutions to change health systems around the world. Now is an **opportunity** to strengthen health systems because there will be other **pandemics in the future**. We need to **work altogether**, move forward, and learn from our mistakes.

Just because the government said something, it is not necessarily the **truth**. We need **journalists** to inform the public on how responses are being developed. We also need people to **hold governments accountable**.

*Nadejda Dermendjieva - Executive Director, Bulgarian Fund for Women:*

When **space is closing for civil society**, it is closing for all sectors, from women's rights organizations to health NGOs.

In **Bulgaria**, **closing of civic space** became visible in 2018 and it is increasing now with the COVID19 crisis. Government sees an **opportunity to strengthen its power**. It will affect civil society actors in the long run.

**Health** is a fundamental **human right** and is thereby connected to all other human rights. That is why if you threaten one particular human right, you threaten all of them.

There are 3 roles civil society organizations can play: 1. **Activists and small grass-root organizations** that hold accountable the perpetrators. 2. **Bigger organizations** that open doors to make space for the most

vulnerable people to be at the table, through advocacy. 3. **Philanthropy organizations**, whose role is to support the 2 first categories of NGOs in their work.

In time of crisis, people must **together to solve problems**. In retrospect, there have been a **lack of communication** between the different actors. **The activists of the future will be regular people with strong beliefs.**

*[Mike Podmore - Executive Director, STOPAIDS; Chair, Action for Global Health:](#)*

We have to recognize the **right of civil society** to be at the **governance table**. Governance is only efficient if it includes the voices of all stakeholders. It is insufficient to **consult civil society outside of governance structures**. We have been calling for a **permanent role of civil society** in governance structures.

It changes the whole dynamic when you have **governments sitting at the table alongside civil society** and speaking equally as **colleagues** with them.

There is an issue of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) **representation at the global level**. At the moment, it is basically few governments and multilateral agencies, **without any role for civil society**. It is a **massive problem**. Unless CSOs are involved in the process, we are not going to ensure equitable processes.

The big questions are: **Will civil society be involved?** How and Who?

**Health data** became a critical issue for all of us. It is a **brand-new challenge** we are facing. It is very important to invest in community-led monitoring.

*[Thomas Schwarz - Executive Secretary, Medicus Mundi International:](#)*

When we talk about **democratic global health governance**, we also talk about **efficient multilateral institutions**. **World Health Organization (WHO)** has a big role to play in this, as the world global health institution.

But the problem is that **civil society is not represented in WHO**. What kind of multilateralism are we defending, when we see the very **active participation of authoritarian regime in WHO**? We work hard to strengthen the voice of civil society in WHO.

**World Health Assembly** is a show, the result of a year long process of debates and discussions.

**This year it is very special**. We were not allowed to speak. 83 organizations submitted written statements. Some of these statements cover a wide variety of topics. We called states **to respond to the COVID in a way to protect their people** that is respectful of democracy and proportionality.

We need to take care of **WHO and this democratic multilateralism**. We must make sure it is not replaced by a system giving the voice to those with **more money or more power**.